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Amazon book review of David Ray Griffin's God Exists But Gawd Does Not (2016)

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Anatheism / science returns to theism: from traditional theism to atheism to panentheism.

GRIFFIN, DAVID RAY. (2016). *God Exists But Gawd Does Not: From Evil to New Atheism to Fine-Tuning*. Anoka, Minnesota: Process Century Press: 331 pages.

This book is volume 2 of the Theological Explorations Series, a series exploring “the implications of Whiteheadian [Alfred North Whitehead] philosophy and theology for religious belief and practice,” including ecological practices and possible “Whiteheadian solutions” to planetary problems (John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin: Series Preface), Jeanyne B. Slettom, General Editor.

[Reviewed by Theodore Walker Jr. (August 2016), Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas 75275]

*The word ‘**panentheism**’ (pan-en-theism, not ‘pantheism’) comes from ‘pan’ (all that is real) + ‘en’ (is included in) + ‘theos’ (God) + ism, meaning ‘all that is real is included in God’-ism. According to panentheism, God is the all-inclusive reality.

Description

David Ray Griffin employs the term “anatheism” (ana-theism) for describing a natural scientific return to theism, by moving logically from traditional theism to atheism to panentheism. Griffin shows how natural scientific reasoning leads from commitment to traditional theism (“Gawd” exists) to modern atheism (“Gawd” does not exist), then from modern atheism to [constructive postmodern] Whiteheadian panentheism (“God” does exist).

For coining the term anatheism, Griffin credits Rupert Sheldrake’s “Finding God Again: The Rise of Anatheism” (14 February 2014 online reference to an audio-taped lecture). Griffin quotes Sheldrake as saying “anatheism” means “‘returning to a belief in God after passing through the purifying fires of atheism’” (Griffin 2016: 132, 318). Griffin says: “By lifting up a number of features of our experience and world that contradict both atheism and traditional theism, this book shows that there is a third alternative [panentheism] thereby encouraging anatheism” (318).

This book has two main parts:

In Part I—“Why Gawd Does Not Exit”—Griffin offers arguments for the nonexistence of “Gawd.”

In Part II—“Why God Does Exist”—Griffin offers arguments for the existence of “God.”

Distinguishing “Gawd” from “God” by reference to divine power:

Throughout, Griffin distinguishes the traditional conception of “Gawd” as all-powerful or “omnipotent in the traditional sense” (p. 2) from the Whiteheadian-panentheist conception of “God” as all-powerful. Against the traditional sense of omnipotence, meaning “Gawd” is in “complete control” (315) of all events, including evil events (hence, the problem of evil/theodicy), Griffin argues that “God” is “not omnipotent in the traditional sense” (240).

Griffin advances the Whiteheadian-panentheist argument that “God’s power is persuasive, not controlling” (315).

In Part I—“Why Gawd Does Not Exit”—Griffin agrees with atheists who deny the existence of “Gawd.” In six chapters he offers six reasons. The traditional conception of omnipotence yields an insolvable problem of “Evil” (chapter 1). Also, the traditional conception of supernatural creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*) is “ruled out” (44) by “Scientific Naturalism” (chapter 2) and by “Evolution” (chapter 3); while traditional arguments from “Consciousness” (chapter 4) and appeals to “Miracles” (chapter 5) fail as arguments for the existence of “Gawd.” Moreover, conceiving of omnipotence in terms of coercive control has “Immoral Effects” (chapter 6). These good reasons—for denying the existence of “Gawd”—are, however, not good reasons for denying the existence of “God.”

Instead, there are good reasons (reasons that are self-consistent and adequate to all evidence) for affirming the existence of “God.” Griffin says: “For people who have rejected Gawd, Part II of this book provides several reasons for returning to belief in a divine reality, but of another type, sometimes called *panentheism*” (132).

In Part II—“Why God Does Exist”—in eight chapters Griffin offer eight good reasons for affirming panentheism. They are arguments from “Mathematics” (chapter 7), “Morality” (chapter 8), “Logic and Rationality” (chapter 9), “Truth” (chapter 10), “Religious Experience” (chapter 11), “Metaphysical Order” (chapter 12), “Cosmological Order” (chapter 13), and “Teleological Order” (chapter 14). According to chapter 7, the undeniable “reality of mathematics” and logic provides a “strong argument for the existence of God” (166) “understood as the mind or soul of the universe” (170). The chapter 8 argument from morality holds that an adequate moral philosophy—that affirms moral realism—requires affirming the reality of God. The chapter 9 argument from logic and rationality holds that “the existence of logical truth does seem to point to the existence of a divine actuality, through which logical principles and truths can exist and be effective in the world” (207). The chapter 10 argument from truth holds that “the existence of factual truth” provides another reason “for affirming the reality of God” (227). The chapter 11 argument from religious experience holds that the reality of God explains the universality and the variety of religious experiences, and that panentheism explains how “our lives *are* important for the universe” (237). Griffin’s Whiteheadian-panentheist arguments—from the metaphysical order of any cosmic epoch (chapter 12), the cosmological order of our present cosmic epoch (chapter 13), and the teleological order of cosmic fine-tuning (chapter 14)—add to a cumulative case strongly favoring the existence of “God.”

At the conclusion of the chapter on teleological order, Griffin says:

“The scientific community rightly rejects supernatural theism, with its omnipotent deity that can interrupt the world’s normal cause-effect relations. But Whitehead, who in *Process and Reality* endorsed a very early version of fine-tuning, provided a basis for explaining the contingent laws of nature in terms of a *naturalistic* theism. So there is no good reason why scientists could not entertain this explanation.” (298)

Scientists should consider Whiteheadian-panentheist explanations. With no offence to scientific naturalism, Griffin encourages anatheism.

In his Postscript—“Why Belief in God, Not Gawd, Is Important,” Griffin argues for the ecological importance of panentheism. With regard to advancing ecological responsibility, Griffin argues that traditional “belief in Gawd” can be harmful insofar as the idea of a totally controlling deity contributes to complacency about responding to climate change; and he argues that atheism can be harmful because it provides no moral norms, no ultimate meaning, and no basis for hope. Unlike traditional theism, and unlike atheism, panentheism can be helpful. According to Griffin, panentheism provides “a basis for hope” because “God is calling people all over the planet to exert their utmost to save a livable climate for future generations” (317). To be sure, concern for the global environment (global warming and climate change) is, says Griffin, “the most important reason for belief in God, rather than either Gawd or atheism” (307) because “[t]he survival of civilization will require worldwide mobilization to eliminate the use of fossil fuels quickly” (314). This postscripted concern is expressed fully in Griffin’s 2015 book, *Unprecedented: Can Civilization Survive the CO2 Crisis?*

Critical Evaluation

In his Preface, Griffin says he was hoping to write “the best book on the existence of God ever written;” and he wrote with trust that his readers will “let me know how far short I fell” (January 2016 Book Preface). Though obviously among the very best, I see one shortfall.

There are places in Griffin’s book where the correctly full-length idea—of “God” being “not omnipotent in the traditional sense” (240)—is wrongly shortened to ‘not omnipotent.’ Examples include Griffin describing “God” as “not an omnipotent, supernatural being” (213), as “non-omnipotent” (226), as “not portrayed as either impassible or omnipotent” (245), and as “a non-omnipotent deity” (295). In *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (SUNY 1984) Charles Hartshorne recognized “Two Meanings of ‘All-Powerful’” (10-26). The classical meaning embraced by traditional theism is a theological mistake. The alternative neoclassical meaning is correct. Accordingly, God is *not* all-powerful/omnipotent *in the classical-traditional sense*; however, God *is* all-powerful/omnipotent *in the neoclassical sense*.

Shortfall or not, I know of no better book for encouraging a return to theism (anatheism) in natural science. Here, scientific naturalism is not violated or separated from theological inquiry by dualism. Also, for those scientists avoiding the G-word, panentheism can accommodate a wide range of deliberations about mathematical, logical, quantum, biological, psychological, and cosmological relations to all-inclusive reality. Such naturalistic panentheism describes and inspires natural scientific advances toward natural theology and natural theological ethics.

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